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“Looking Back: The Past, History and History Writing in Early America and the Atlantic World”, Third EEASA Biannual Conference

University Paris-Diderot, Institut Charles V, 9-11 December 2010

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"Looking Back: The Past, History and History Writing in Early America and the Atlantic World", Third EEASA Biannual Conference

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- 1 The third biannual conference of the European Early American Studies Association (EEASA) was held in Paris at the Institut Charles V (Université Paris-Diderot) on Thursday December 9, Friday December 10 and Saturday December 11, 2010. It was co-hosted by Université Paris-Diderot and Université Versailles-St Quentin, and locally organized by REDEHJA (Réseau pour le Développement Européen de l'Histoire de la Jeune Amérique). After holding its previous conference in Venice in December 2008 on "Amity, Enmity and Emotions", the EEASA conference met for the second time in Paris, building on an active international network of scholars of Early American history and the Atlantic World. More than thirty scholars and doctoral students from Europe, the United States, Canada and Israel gathered as part of this event, which was well-attended by colleagues from Paris universities as well. Marie-Jeanne Rossignol (Paris-Diderot), the current president of EEASA, was the main organiser of the 2010 event, together with Lauric Henneon (Versailles-St Quentin). In what required major organisational skills given the size of the conference, they were assisted by doctoral students, among whom Jean-Baptiste Goyard and Anne-Claire Levy.
- 2 The conference turned to a reflection on the past and its multi-layered construction within the broad time frame, 1607-1865. This large-scale event¹ invited researchers to engage in critical investigation of the multi-faceted perceptions of the past, history and history-writing in Early America within the Atlantic context. Over the course of the three days, the participants examined the way different understandings of the early "past" were conceptualized, idealized, redefined, rediscovered or preserved, and analyzed the

ideological implications of complex, multiple and often conflicting views of the past. The presentations also addressed the emergence of historical consciousness over the period, and showed that the different visions of history often implied conflicting views of human nature. Among the wide range of implications of this topic, the participants were finally led to reflect on their own practice of history-writing and engaged in fruitful debates about their own interpretations of their objects of study.

- 3 The first half-day session was devoted to a graduate session. Four Ph.D. candidates gave papers about their work in progress and received comments by three professors of the Program Committee: Trevor Burnard (Warwick University), Allan Potofsky (Université Paris-Diderot) and Naomi Wulf (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle). The conference itself was inaugurated with the presentation of a research project conducted at the University of Sherbrooke by Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec and Léon Robichaud. This was actually the first time they presented the bilingual version of their website about marronage in Saint Domingue. On this online platform, the users can have access to an extensive database containing primary material about marronage and make use of thousands of digitized documents (prison lists and slave advertisements) for research or pedagogical purposes. Both scholars explained that their intention was to offer a new framework of analysis of marronage in Saint Domingue by making primary material accessible to all users. This website thus provides both a research tool for historians of slavery in the French Atlantic world and a useful online resource to teach this topic by engaging directly with historical sources. The first day of the conference ended with a first keynote address delivered by Trevor Burnard (Warwick University). His talk was a call for reflection on the transformational impact of a pivotal period in early American history (1690-1750) that has often been neglected by historians but which deserved closer scrutiny to better understand the contextual stakes of the later decades of American history.
- 4 The second day of the conference opened with a second keynote address delivered by Allan Potofsky (University Paris-Diderot) and focused on the idea of the mythical view of the past through the lens of Thomas Jefferson's idealized vision of eighteenth-century Paris. Following Potofsky's address, the morning session ended with the first panel made of two papers exploring the use of the ancient past in national and personal constructions. Susan Branson (Syracuse University) demonstrated how and why the Americans of the early national period, who generally looked to classical Greece and Rome for architectural inspiration, came to be influenced by ancient Egypt. She argued that the Americans of this period turned to the Egyptian past and reappropriated its style at a time when national identity was in the making. The notions of permanence, stability or monumentality of the Egyptian architectural style were precisely what led the Americans to employ the Egyptian past when erecting national public buildings. Catherine Kerrison (Villanova University) examined the thought of Thomas Jefferson's daughter and focused on the role of the ancient past in the construction of her identity. She showed how Martha Jefferson Randolph looked back to different pasts (Jansenism, the Scottish Enlightenment and classicism) and synthesized those various influences to construct a unique and personal view of American womanhood that differed from the other dominant paradigms of female life in Early America.
- 5 The next set of papers confronted different philosophies of history in the eighteenth century. Lucia Bergamasco (Université d'Orléans) first examined John Adams's sense of the past and showed that his disenchanted vision of history stemmed from a quite cynical view of human nature. She also highlighted Adams's propensity to discuss past events in

his letters in which he often tried to deconstruct the myths surrounding the history of the American Revolution and also attempted to vindicate his own place in national history. The following paper given by Johann Neem (Western Washington University) was in direct dialogue with the previous talk. It explored Thomas Jefferson's conception of history, which radically differed from Adams's. Johann Neem argued that Jefferson's idealistic and optimistic perception of human nature stood in sharp contrast with previous understandings of the true nature of man. In Jefferson's view, sinfulness was a product of history. In America, human beings could return to their original goodness and to a purer form of society. By moving away from corrupt European society, the Americans had returned to nature and could make use of their unique ability to choose the most virtuous leaders to lead their society. The third paper of this session was given by Mark Spencer (Brock University, Ontario), who investigated the origins of the philosophy of history of the American Enlightenment by evaluating the impact of Hume's *History of England* on the historical thought of the Americans of the Revolutionary era.

- 6 The last session of the day focused on the relative impact of 1776, a founding landmark in American history, and explored how the spirit of the American Revolution was invoked, imagined and re-invented in the early national period. Sam Haynes (University of Texas at Arlington) first examined the way the Anglo-Texans were influenced by American revolutionary heritage in their own struggle against Mexico in 1835 and 1836. Haynes argued that the Anglo-Texans not only drew inspiration from the American Revolution by appropriating the American revolutionary language to articulate their own grievances, but also used the memory of the American revolutionary past to justify and give momentum to their resistance movement against Mexico. The following talk given by Michael Zuckerman (University of Pennsylvania) re-opened the historiographical debate about the relative radicalism of the American Revolution. In a paper entitled "The Stifling of the Spirit of '76", Michael Zuckerman rejected the assumption that the American Revolution had transformative short-term implications. The audience engaged in a very lively discussion of Michael Zuckerman's argument during the ensuing debate. Carine Lounissi (Université de Rouen) then addressed the conception of 1776 as a "beginning" in her analysis of the interpretations of American colonial political contracts during the (pre-) Revolution. She showed how American colonists recreated beginnings by elaborating a mythical version of their history as a people.
- 7 The third and final day of the conference opened with a third and last keynote address delivered by Peter Mancall (University of Southern California). His talk, entitled "How Europeans Thought about the American Past, for Example, 1580-1730", offered a reversal of the overall theme of the conference, as it developed a reflection on European models of history inspired by Colonial America and the importance of perspective when looking at the past.
- 8 The following papers were given in a session examining how the Americans of the early nineteenth century looked back to the past and advocated a return to the primitive as a solution to social ills or to secure the advancements of the American civilization. Jeffrey Mullins (St. Cloud State University) showed that, in fear of degeneration and the dangers brought by the refinements of civilization, the American reformers of the antebellum period called people to embrace the practices of the past and return to the physical culture of earlier times to secure the progress of the American society. However, Jeffrey Mullins pointed out the difficulty for Americans to embrace the practices of the "savage" people due to the racial tensions shaping their society. Michael Zakim (Tel Aviv

University) examined how physical culture was also embraced by Americans to address the anxieties provoked by the emergence of a new social and economic order in the mid-nineteenth century. Physical education would not only be a way to halt the physical decay that threatened civilized and urban Americans, but it would also bring social order and civic virtue back again in the modern American society. Both scholars showed that the moment when Americans were the most concerned with spurring on progress was also a time when they looked backward and embraced the past to build a brighter future for themselves.

- 9 Finally, three scholars of the early nineteenth century shifted away from the intellectual approach to the past and addressed a different understanding of history. They highlighted the emergence of a historical consciousness at the turn of the century, which took the form of an emotional and material attachment to the past. First, Seth Cotlar (Willamette University) decided to explore the nostalgic sensibility in the United States in the 1820s. He argued that the feeling of nostalgia felt by some Americans was not some vain emotion that should be discarded by historians. The melancholy felt by Americans such as John Fanning Watson should be reassessed as a meaningful historic register that conveyed a critical assessment about the present time. In her paper entitled "The Local, the National and the Antiquarian", Anne Verplanck (Penn State University) investigated the role of a group of Americans who collected, circulated and published historical material in the emergence of a national historical consciousness in the early nineteenth century. In collecting and preserving this material, she argued, these men participated in the making of early national history. Finally, Whitney Martinko (University of Virginia) explained that, in antebellum culture, history and progress were not at odds—they even coexisted as compatible features of the American landscape. Indeed, at the turn of the nineteenth century, some Americans wished to keep history visible in the landscape even in the context of a changing world. They believed that improvement should not be condemned and that progress did not mean erasing the past. Therefore, these Americans meant to preserve and save historical evidence in certain sites or buildings while not standing in the way of progress.
- 10 As signified in the lively discussions, the conference provided the paper-givers and the audience with a renewed understanding of Early America, not solely as a "beginning" but viewed retrospectively. The object of enquiry went beyond intellectual history, in approaches that delved into the social, political and cultural history of American beginnings. It demonstrated how the past has often been the object of contested definitions and a stake in the power relations in Early America within the Atlantic context. From an organizational point of view, it confirmed an interest in a European venue for Early American Studies. The next EEASA conference will be held in Bayreuth, Germany in December 2012 and address the question of "Empires and Imagination in Early America and the Atlantic World".
- 11 The program of the conference is available online at: <http://www.redehja.eu>
The website about marronage in Saint Domingue presented at this conference is a project co-directed by Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec and Léon Robichaud, and supported by the French Atlantic History Group (McGill University, Mellon Foundation) in collaboration with the Faculty of Letters and Humanities of the University of Sherbrooke. The website is available at: <http://www.marronnage.info>
For more information on the EEASA: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/cas/eeasa>
For more details on the activities of REDEHJA: <http://www.redehja.eu>

NOTES

1. Given the organization of the conference in double sets of parallel panels, the author of the present report can only offer a presentation of the sessions she attended.

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